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ABSTRACT

Public concern about day care now focuses on infants and toddlers who began receiving out-of-home care before they had established attachments to their parents. In 1987, public conscience was inflamed by a series of reports in the popular media and the professional literature that underscored potential risks inherent in out-of-home care intiated when children were at an early age. It is maintained that the conclusions of these reports are not justified. Numerous problems in the reports resulted from researchers relying primarily on the Strange Situation to assess effects of infant day care. There is a great deal of variation in the choice of background variables used to define the day care experience. There is also great variability in the manner in which "extent of care" is defined. Furthermore, researchers do not always include measures of the quality of care received. Despite two decades of intensive research, the effects of day care remain poorly understood. However, a few simple questions can be answered with confidence. Nonparental care experiences need not have harmful effects on children's development. Quality of care and amount of weekly nonparental care appear to be important influences. It is hoped that the current wave of research on day care will yield clearer conclusions than that of the last 20 years. (RH)

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SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT INFANT DAYCARE

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By the early 1980's there was a widespread consensus that nonparental care begun in the third year of life or later need not have adverse effects on psychosocial development, contrary to the dire predictions of attachments theorists. This conclusion had to be qualified, however, because most of the studies involved atypically good programs, ignored family daycare arrangements, and paid no attention to group differences or similarities with respect to parental values, attitudes, or child characteristics before enrollment in out-of-home care.

In any event, public concern about daycare no longer centers on those who began care as preschoolers--either because it is now a normative and manifestly nonharmful experience for preschoolers, or because the accumulated evidence has become overwhelming. Instead, concern is now focused on infants and toddlers--children who began receiving out-of-home care before they had time to establish and consolidate attachments to their parents. In 1987, the public conscience was inflamed by a series of reports in the popular media and in the professional literature underscoring the potential risks inherent in early-initiated out-of-home care.

We do not believe that these conclusions are justified. There has been a tendency among researchers to rely primarily upon the Strange Situation to assess the effects of infant daycare. This practice of focusing primarily on one measure is fraught with several problems, particularly when the validity

and reliability of this measure have been challenged. In addition, researchers use data gathered with the Strange Situation in a variety of ways. In studying the relationship between nonparental care and attachment, for example, some researchers use the classification categories (secure, resistant, and avoidant) to index the quality of relationships whereas others focus on ratings of behavior--particularly avoidance and resistance--in the reunion episodes.

Belsky has emphasized that among those daycare infants classified as insecure, the avoidant pattern should and does predominate. In several recent studies, however, researchers have failed to find differences in the proportions of avoidant and resistant classifications. If, as Belsky suggests, attachment theory predicts an association between daycare and avoidant attachment, then the absence of a clearcut pattern in this regard raises questions regarding the meaning of "insecurity" in daycare infants.

Even when daycare is associated with insecurity, these associations often hold true only for specific subsamples: firstborns, or father-son attachment relationships, or mother-son relationships. In one study, moreover, the pattern of results ran counter to the predictions of attachment theory. Girls who were cared for primarily by their mothers and who had experienced less than five hours of daycare per week were more likely to form insecure relationships with their fathers (50%) than were girls who experience more than ten hours of daycare per week (14%). The absence of clearcut associations between

daycare and insecurity precludes conclusions about the effects of daycare on infant-parent attachment.

Because the Strange Situation was developed and validated with infants who were cared for primarily by their mothers, there is in any event some question regarding its validity for assessing attachment in infants experiencing daycare. Reactions to the Strange Situation are influenced by social and cultural contexts, and thus the Strange Situation may not have the same psychological meaning for infants of employed and unemployed mothers. For example, although children who are accustomed to brief separations by virtue of repeated day-care experiences may behave "avoidantly", their behavior might actually reflect a developmentally-precocious pattern of independence and confidence rather than insecurity. It is thus inappropriate to speak of insecure attachments in the absence of information concerning the antecedents of "insecure" or "avoidant" behavior in daycare children. Such studies have not been conducted.

In any event, the evidence regarding the association between quality of infant-parent interaction and subsequent Strange Situation behavior is quite weak and inconsistent even when research has been conducted with samples of children cared for exclusively at home. Furthermore, "avoidant" behavior in daycare children may not have the adverse implications for future behavior claimed by Belsky and other advocates of the Strange Situation procedure. The predictive validity of the Strange Situation is actually much weaker than is often

claimed--i.e, the association tends to be found only when there is stability over time with respect to family circumstances and caretaking arrangements--and thus the hypothesized relationship between insecure/avoidant attachment and subsequent problematic behavior in daycare infants needs to be empirically evaluated. There is as yet no evidence that "avoidant" daycare infants in fact behave any differently in future years than those who behave "securely" as infants in the Strange Situation.

Whether or not daycare increases the frequency of "insecure" attachments, and whether or not insecure/avoidant attachments are predictive of subsequent psychosocial problems, the observation of Strange Situation behavior at best provides a very narrow assessment of the effects of daycare. We need studies that sample a broad range of outcomes, and follow subjects through time, so that the extent and longevity of any effects can be traced. Regardless of their breath and perseverance, furthermore, the increased "risk" associated with daycare is such that the majority of infants receiving out-of-home care have secure attachments to their mothers and fathers. It is obviously important not to exaggerate the potentially negative effects of out-of-home care on infant-parent attachment.

It is also important to recognize that there is a great deal of variation in the operationalization and choice of background variables used to define the daycare experience. When we discuss "daycare" we are not referring to a clearcut, homogeneous treatment but to a complex construct influenced by

a variety of factors.

In addition, there is a great deal of variability in the manner in which "extent of care" is defined. The term "full-time daycare" is used by different researchers to refer to daycare experiences ranging from as little as 20 to 30 to 35 hours per week. The rationale for distinguishing between full-time and part time care is unclear and in some cases appears to be based on post hoc considerations rather than on apriori predictions regarding the ways in which varying amounts of daycare might affect infant development. Some researchers distinguish but two groups of children--those in daycare and those in home care--and some provide only the average amount of daycare, without specifying the criteria used to assign children to their "daycare" group. Such inconsistencies across studies makes it difficult to compare results. Perhaps a more fruitful way of approaching this issue would be to view daycare experience as a continuous variable, particularly as most American infants now experience some non maternal care, ranging from a few hours of babysitting to 40 hours per week of regular non-maternal care, and more accurate reports of the amount of daycare experienced would enable researchers to assess effects more accurately.

Finally, we must consider the quality of care received. While most researchers allude to the importance of high quality care, few studies of infant daycare actually include measures of the quality of care. The results of these studies suggest that children attending poor quality facilities are indeed at

greater "risk" than children attending facilities of better quality. It would be helpful to include measures of quality in future studies. In sum, despite two decades of intensive research, the effects of day care remains poorly understood. In large part, the lack of progress reflects the extent to which researchers have been preoccupied with the "wrong" questions--first asking "is nonmaternal care bad for children?", instead of "how does nonmaternal care affect children's development?" and later remaining focused on the effects of nonmaternal care per se instead of recognizing that nonmaternal care experiences have a myriad incarnations and must always be viewed in the context of other events and experiences in the children's lives.

Our clumsy investigative strategy notwithstanding, we can actually answer a few of the simpler questions with some confidence. We now know, for example, that nonparental care experiences need not have harmful effects on children's development--the majority of infants and children receiving out-of-home care do not differ systematically from the majority of children cared for exclusively at home. We can also assert that different children appear to be affected differently by day care experiences, although we remain ignorant about most of the factors that mediate these differential effects. The quality of care received both at home and in alternative care facilities appears to be important, whereas the specific type of care (exclusive home care, family daycare, center daycare) appears to be much less significant than was once thought.

There is suggestive evidence that the amount of weekly nonparental care is influential, and repeated poorly-substantiated claims that the age of onset is important. Child temperament, parental attitudes and values, preenrollment levels of child functioning, gender, and birth order may all be influential, but reliable evidence is lacking. Unfortunately, many of the studies we have cited above were originally designed as studies of maternal employment rather than as studies of daycare, and so there is vast (and poorly specified) variability within and among studies with respect to the actual care arrangements, the amount of care received, the age at which it began, and the ways in which outcomes were assessed. Even when the same outcomes--such as the security of attachment--are assessed, variation in the age of assessment, means of quantification, and the composition and selection of comparison groups preclude even tentative conclusions about specific effects. We can only hope that the current wave of research on daycare comprises better-designed studies yielding clearer conclusions that those of the last 20 years.